

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0388/01 1681221
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 171221Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6439
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000388

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (HAYES); DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2019
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTY GRANTED PUBLIC SPACE TO HOLD
CONGRESS: ILLUSION OR INCLUSION?

REF: A. TUNIS 259
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 864
[1](#)C. 08 TUNIS 851

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In an unprecedented political move, President Ben Ali granted access to a public hall for the Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (FDTL) opposition party to hold its first official national congress on May 28-30. FDTL founding member Dr. Mustapha Ben Jaafar was elected party Secretary General and he announced his candidacy for the October 2009 presidential elections. It remains to be seen whether the GOT Constitutional Council will allow him to run, however. The FDTL publicly praised President Ben Ali, but privately stated President Ben Ali's move was a calculated approach to pit the FDTL against the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and Ben Jaafar against PDP founder and declared presidential candidate Nejib Chebbi. An FDTL representative opined to PolOff that calming the opposition with some degree of political acquiescence was not an unexpected Ben Ali ploy in the run-up to elections. The representative did not foresee any political changes post the 2009 presidential and legislative elections. End Summary.

Ben Jaafar "Takes" Charge

[1](#)2. (SBU) In an unprecedented political move, President Ben Ali intervened to grant an opposition party, the Democratic Forum on Work and Freedom (FDTL), access to a public hall to hold its first official national congress on May 28-30. Prior to Ben Ali's intervention, prompted by a letter from Ben Jaafar to the President, the FDTL had been unable to obtain permission to use public space or to rent space from a private organization. (Note: The inability to rent space for meetings is an oft-heard complaint from Tunisian opposition and civil society groups. Hotels and other public venues often turn away such groups claiming that they are "fully booked" or "under renovations.")

[1](#)3. (C) As is usual in Tunisia, the FDTL hosted members of other parties at its congress. Notably, and in another unusual move, the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) was represented by its Deputy Secretary General, Faouzi Aouam. Ben Jaafar later publicly referred to Aouam's presence at the congress as a pleasant surprise and a possible step in easing political tensions. At the congress, Mustapha Ben Jaafar was elected formally FDTL Secretary General, a position he has long held. He announced his candidacy for the October 2009 presidential elections and

raised the possibility of having a single candidate represent the opposition in the presidential elections. It is not clear whether Ben Jaafar meets the candidacy requirements laid out in the extraordinary amendment to the constitution for the 2009 elections, however (Ref C). How the criteria with respect to being the "elected" head of the party for the previous two years are interpreted will determine whether Ben Jaafar is allowed to present his candidacy. This decision will rest with the nine-member Constitutional Council. Asked by Pol/EconCouns whether he thought he would be allowed, in the end, to present his candidacy, Ben Jaafar replied, laughing, "That depends on whether I'm a good boy."

¶4. (U) In a speech at the congress, Ben Jaafar publicly thanked President Ben Ali for his personal intervention. Privately, FDTL officials later said the expression of public gratitude was the "least they could do," emphasizing that the party was not vying for additional favors from President Ben Ali. Also during the congress, Ben Jaafar called for the creation of an independent body to monitor the October 2009 elections as opposed to the Ministry of the Interior. He also asked for guaranties of judicial independence, freedom of association, and the right to assemble, and he called for the relaxation of all political restrictions and for reforms to address education, unemployment and increasing economic disparities.

Tales from the Congress

¶5. (U) Dr. Khelil Ezzaouia, FDTL political bureau member in charge of external relations, told PolOff on June 11 that the

FDTL congress was successful on various fronts: Ben Jaafar was elected Secretary General and with unanimous party support announced his presidential candidacy; the congress brought together all members of the opposition, allowing for free and frank political discourse; it illustrated the FDTL's organization and productive working relationship with the rest of the opposition; and, provided the forum for Ben Jaafar to call for a united opposition with a single representative candidate for the October 2009 presidential elections.

¶6. (U) Ezzaouia opined that the congress was additionally successful because the attendance of the RCD's second highest ranking member, Deputy Secretary General Faouzi Aouam, gave the FDTL political credibility. Ezzaouia qualified Aouam's address as an "intelligent discourse," far from the traditional rhetoric on the legitimacy and continued need for the RCD to remain in power that the opposition expected. Aouam's speech centered on the increasing need for pluralism and the current challenges of the country, particularly youth unemployment.

Ben Ali's Gesture: Illusion or Inclusion?

¶7. (C) While FDTL officials have publicly thanked President Ben Ali and called President Ben Ali's personal intervention a positive sign, they are also asking for further steps towards political openness. Privately, they maintained that the FDTL had no illusions that President Ben Ali was moving towards pluralism. Ezzaouia on June 11 highlighted to PolOff the fact that President Ben Ali's intervention coincided with the visit of Nejib Chebbi, the declared candidate of the Progressive Democratic Party-PDP, to the United States. He claimed that the FDTL believed the RCD was pitting the FDTL against the PDP, by giving the FDTL what it has continuously denied the PDP-public access. (Note: During PolOff's meeting with Ezzaouia, FDTL leader Dr. Ben Jaafar was holding a meeting with the PDP's Secretary General, Maya Jribi at the FDTL headquarters.) According to Ezzaouia, the FDTL interpreted Ben Ali's gesture as a calculated effort to give the impression of inclusion, and calm the opposition in the run-up to elections. The FDTL expected the status quo in

Parliament to remain the same post the 2009 legislative elections, with no seats for the FDTL.

18. (C) Ezzaouia said the FDTL had not changed its party stance on requesting international election observers for the 2009 elections. He claimed that Ben Jaafar's current call for "unbiased local observers" was in accordance with his previous rhetoric since the overriding goal is to have Tunisians involved in the electoral process. He also admitted that the FDTL's proposal for a single candidate to represent the opposition would not pass muster. According to Ezzaouia, contradictions and divisions within the opposition weakened them and made them less credible to the public. The FDTL planned to meet the week of June 15-20 to decide on a national campaign strategy. For financial and political reasons, Ezzaouia claimed the FDTL would focus particularly on strategies for the 2014 elections. (Note: In an aside, Ezzaouia told PolOff that the FDTL was struggling financially. Local Arabic weekly magazine, Haqaiq, however reported on June 15 that Ben Jaafar confirmed the FDTL received financial support from the presidency to help organize the FDTL congress.)

Comment

19. (C) Although the FDTL's private assessment of President Ben Ali's gesture is credible, the party also understands that it stands to gain from the ruling party's largesse. As Ben Jaafar told Pol/EconCouns, however, this will require that he stays in the ruling party's good graces. Ben Jaafar's call for "unbiased local election observers" as opposed to "international observers," appears to be a step in that direction. It distances his party line from that of the PDP's Nejib Chebbi, who has just returned from a trip to the United States to court potential international elections observation groups, such as the Carter Center and the National Endowment for Democracy. The FDTL is trying to walk a fine line between maintaining credibility as an independent opposition party and accommodating a government and ruling party that embrace political pluralism in principle, but actively obstruct genuinely independent political activity. Thus far, the FDTL's accommodations vis-a-vis the authorities seem to be paying dividends in terms of access to public

space and reported financial assistance. The FDTL has also been the subject of greater media coverage from both private and state-run news media. The extent to which the FDTL's strategy will succeed in the long term, however, remains to be seen. Whether the Constitutional Council will allow Ben Jaafar to present his candidacy and the GOT will allow him to campaign freely will be important indicators. End Comment.
Godec